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**"Them who have ears, let them hear": A qualitative analysis of  
African-American vernacular English used in Black children's  
literature audiobook narration performances**

Vashalice Howard  
*Iowa State University*

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**““Them who have ears, let them hear”: A qualitative analysis of African-American vernacular English used in Black children’s literature audiobook narration performances**  
by

**Vashalice Howard**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF SCIENCE**

Major: Education

Program of Study Committee:  
Katy Swalwell, Major Professor  
Constance P. Hargrave  
Emily Hayden

The student author, whose presentation of the scholarship herein was approved by the program of study committee, is solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2020

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## **DEDICATION**

It is with great honor and pride that I dedicate my thesis to the memory of my beloved grandmother Vashtye Vivian Hill. She was my first teacher and taught me the value of education, both in school and in life.

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## ABSTRACT

Since the 1800s, Black children's literature has been a pioneer in literary achievement and has documented the advance of Black people from enslavement to the modern-day. The genre has now transcended written text as it is now readily available in the audiobook format through an application such as Audible, Overdrive, and Libby. The introduction of audiobook narrators underscores this transformation. Audiobook narrators enhance our enjoyment, readership, and at times even the quality of the story being read much to the capitalistic success of publishing houses and imprints. Culturally, however, the role of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in Black children's books are often overlooked in favor of black children's books that are written and narrated in standard English. Black children's literature that features heavy usage of African-American Vernacular English lacks the audiobook treatment and, in turn, fails to reach a wider audience than its white facing children's literature counterpart.

To handle the cultural dilemmas posed by the current direction of publishing, publishers need to understand the importance of authentic audio representation for Black children in audiobook narration while using African-American Vernacular English. Considering the cultural implications of excluding books with AAVE from audiobook adaptations is necessary. The acknowledgment cultural implications while developing a clear set of principles for selecting narrators that meet cultural criteria rooted in Critical Race Theory, Africanist Theory, Black Authenticity, and Black Authorship.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce a qualitative analysis of African-American Vernacular English used in Black children's literature audiobook narration performances. The issue currently hindering nuanced AAVE narrative performances in Black children's audiobook literature is the lack of adequate cultural narrative standards that are recognized industry-wide. This issue produces narrative selection methods that are not culturally diverse in Blackness. Continuing with the current narrative selection methods of narrators of AAVE in Black children's audiobooks prevents cultural consistency. It causes the narration of AAVE in Black children's audiobooks to become grossly homogeneous, which in turn inhibits the achievement of the goals of Black Authorship and Black Authenticity. Developing a more informed matrix for African-American Vernacular English narration in Black children's audiobook literature could help better implement the consistency focus of culture and, at the same time, help the audiobook industry better monitor and evaluate its narrative choices.

This proposed research aspires to explore options for a nuanced audiobook narrator selection process that would focus on cultural competency. To do this, the author has carried out a qualitative analysis and used it to propose appropriate cultural standards for AAVE audiobook narration performances in Black children's literature. First, defining African-American Vernacular English, giving a brief history of its usage in early African-American literature, and explaining the research questions and their purpose as conducted in this study. Second, a grammatical disclaimer will explain the usage of both grammatical liberties taken, as it pertains to socioracial justice and acknowledgment within academic writing. Lastly, this chapter will reveal the positionality of the author and how that positionality influenced their research.

### **African-American Vernacular English and Black Children's Literature**

The English language has undergone several metamorphoses over its existence. The inclusion of new morphologies, semantics, and phonologies all give nuance to the use of the English language (Delahunty & Garvey, 2010). African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) is the unique speech patterns, colloquialisms, and the counter sociolinguistic continuum of the standard English language used by persons of African descent in the U.S (Schneider & Kortmann, 2004) and is socially considered a language of its own versus an offshoot of modern standard English. African-Americans and Black people as a whole use AAVE in multiple mediums to express themselves and their culture. AAVE has been used in print since the early 1800s (Dillard, 1972), ushered in by authors such as Charles Chestnutt and his short stories depicting the life of enslaved people, free people, whites, and the complicated web of slavery in the U.S. (Davis, 1952).

The use of AAVE for the speech of novel characters helps to give voice to groups of people who are oftentimes disregarded from mainstream culture. The accidental reintroduction of AAVE in Black children's literature through audiobook narrations happened through the creation of some lesser known Black children's books into audiobooks such as *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 1986) and *The People Could Fly* (Hamilton, 1986). Following the literary exploration of African-American Vernacular English used in Black children's literature, the decision to analyze how African-American Vernacular English is narrated in Black children's literature audiobook performances, and how do narrator selection practices complicate authenticity and authorship within Black children's literature became a clear questions to test within Black Authorship and Black Authenticity. The need for analysis of these questions arises in part from the fact that audiobooks for many years have struggled for literary legitimacy (Barry, 2016), and coupled with the still debated accreditation of AAVE as a viable language



(Wright, 1998), these claims lay foundation for a rightful linguistic and critical analysis of audiobook narration of Black children's books.

In books that are written by Black people, for Black people or the masses, the accompanying audiobook should reflect literary authenticity in the narrative. African-American Vernacular English is as varied as a gradient on a color wheel. There is no one way to "sound Black," but certain precautions are necessary to ensure that within its sect of Black culture, the voice of an authentically Black story is heard (McWhorter, 2017). The purpose of this research is to primarily call to attention the use of AAVE within Black children's audiobooks, more specifically, the way it is narrated in the audiobook genre. This research seeks to (a) define what authenticity and authorship mean and why it is essential to Black stories, (b) Explore the relationship of AAVE language and authentic storytelling in Black children's literature, and (c) the establish the importance of authentic audio representation for Black/African children in audiobook narration. I seek to lean against preconceived notions of AAVE lacking nuance and create new standards in audiobook narration of all books written about and for Black people.

### **Grammatical Disclaimer**

As a cultural and grammatical disclaimer, the "B" in Black and "A" in African-American will be uppercased, while lowercasing the "w" in "white" as it pertains to a race of people or their culture. This formatting will deliberately go against APA standards that require Black and White when addressing a race of people and the culture to both be capitalized. The author will instead employ the components of Chicago Style formatting that allows the author to uppercase and lowercase at will. Use this component is only for the uppercasing and lowercasing of Black and white. Outside of this, all other standards will follow APA.

The reasoning in doing this will align with scholar Lori L. Thompson who states: This is about identity and respect. With a mere slash of a copyeditor's pen, my culture is reduced to a

color. It seems silly to have to spell it out, that Black with a lower case "b" is a color. In contrast, Black with a capital "B" refers to a group of people whose ancestors were born in Africa, was brought to the United States against their will, spilled their blood, sweat, and tears to build this nation into a world power and along the way managed to create glorious works of art, passionate music, scientific discoveries, a marvelous cuisine, and untold literary masterpieces (Price, 2019). Likewise, the same will be done for other marginalized racial groups (Latinx/o/a Asian, Native, and Indigenous) mentioned, in an above-stated manner. The "w" in white as it pertains to white people and "white dominant culture" defined as the overall American culture that reflects white American culture and shows influences from English culture while having colonial ties to Great Britain and the spread of the English language, legal system and other cultural attributes (Minahan, 2013) will be lowercase as symbolic of decentralization.

The only instance where this will not be the case is in the usage of a direct quote, or the beginning of a sentence. While the voices of white scholars in the text's subject are salient, it is essential to note that their voices are still dominant. In lowercasing "w," I seek to call attention to this and push against the historical and present narrative of marginalized voices going unnoticed and unheard. Lastly, the term African-American and "Black" will be used interchangeably. Both terms in this text refer to descendants of enslaved black people who are from the United States (Locke & Bailey, 2013). When discussing all African people or cultures that are indigenous to the African continent, the term "African" will be used, and distinctions in culture or a people that reside on the African continent (i.e., West Africans and West African culture) will be used when the text calls for the distinction.

### **Positionality**

My positionality as a Black woman scholar who is deeply invested in the reading practices of Black children, their literacy well-being, and providing information about text for

Black children is influenced by my early love of literature. As a Black girl from a rural area, I was fortunate enough to have access to a public library. My weekly visits to the library shaped my young life and allowed me to see the world without ever leaving my small hometown. My favorite part of going to the library as a child was listening to the children's books on tape. My single mother worked constantly and was often tired when she returned home. I would ask her to read with me or read a book to me. She would allow me to pick out a book and began to read, and, in her exhaustion, she would fall asleep sitting on the edge of the sofa. This happened numerous times to the point where I would then go to my grandmother and ask her to do the same and read with me or to me. My grandmother, whom I cherish, and value dearly, too, was unable to grant me the read-aloud experience I craved because her education level due to the racial circumstances of her youth only allowed her an eighth-grade education. This made it difficult for her to read some of the books I brought to her, and she would instead (with a mixture of sadness and hope) encourage me to seek help from school or the library to learn further how to read for myself, hoping that I would learn to read in a manner that she was never afforded.

The lack of both my grandmother and mother's ability to read with me due to circumstances out of their control drove me to go to the library continuously. At the library, I could dive into classic and current literature and have a "book on tape" narrator read it to me without bothering any nearby adults. While listening one day, I noticed something familiar yet peculiar at the same time. I saw very few "book on tape" books that had characters who looked like and sounded like me as well. I knew instinctively that the narrators of the "book on tape" books were either white women who read in hushed tones or white men with a booming vocal countenance. I never grew up hearing the comforting, jovial voice of my grandmother or the strong, commanding voice of my mother in those stories. Their affirming Blackness spoke to me

every day, and as a child, this is what I needed in my literary narrators: affirmation. Affirmation that my people and their voices mattered and that theirs were not second best to whites. It is within this childhood need for affirmation that I conduct my audiobook research and position myself as a scholar who still needs my people's voices and Blackness affirming me.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature surrounding Black children's literature and AAVE is expansive. Its breadth is evident by the numerous publications from scholars such as Jonda McNair and Violet J. Harris, whose research focus surrounds Black children's literature, Jessica E. Moyer's work in formulating budding audiobook scholarship and John McWhorter's linguistical studies in AAVE. While these scholars have published work within their specialized field, there has yet to emerge a scholar that has written about Black children's literature, audiobooks, and AAVE, combined. An exhaustive review of the literature encompassing all three fields is thus not currently available. This chapter aims to provide, through literature, a foundational understanding of Black children's literature history and AAVE for the average person that informs audiobook narration practices. The chapter divides into two parts. The subject of the first is a brief history of Black children's literature. The formation of Black children's literature is outlined, and the lack of notoriety of classic Black children's literature authors are discussed. The remainder of the chapter is devoted to audiobook narration evaluation, and a foundational introduction of AAVE and its critiques.

### Black Children's Literature

*The Snowy Day* (Keats, 1962) is hailed as the benchmark in racial representation featuring a Black character in children's literature. The canonized success of this book would be best critiqued against another children's book with similar themes and overall style. *Everett Anderson's Christmas Coming* by Lucile Clifton, written in 1971, also focuses on a little Black boy in a winter setting and features innovative illustration and writing style that displays a Black character in a relatable plot that most children Black and non-Black can relate. Considering both books are breakthrough stories within the context of classic children's literature, *The Snowy Day*

(Keats, 1962) is more accepted as a classic because it is widely considered the first picture book to centralize a Black child (Zipp, 2012). Being widely believed as the first picture book to accomplish this says a lot about the exposure Black authors and illustrators received. Picture books specifically for Black children by Black authors and illustrators have been present since the early 1900s, and literature for Black children by Black authors have been around even longer (Capshaw & Duane, 2017). During that time, white authors have also written about Black children and illustrated them in their books to more acclaim, often getting away with inaccurate portrayals of Black life and culture (Capshaw & Duane, 2017). These portrayals of Black life and culture are inaccurate because they serve to reinforce negative stereotypes about Blacks from a white hegemonic point of view. They are free to do this because their whiteness cultivates more meaning and credibility (Ladson-Billing, 1998) about Blackness than Blacks themselves. Credibility is often not afforded to Blacks due to their inferior status (Bell, 1992). Given this historically supported claim, it would be reasonable to assert that Keats's portrayal of a Black child would supersede that of Lucille Clifton's portrayal in literature and audiobook availability as well.

The modern works of prolific Black children's authors Walter Dean Myers (*Jazz* written in 2008), Virginia Hamilton ( *The People Could Fly* written in 1986), John Steptoe (*Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale* written in 1988), Jacqueline Woodson (*brown girl dreaming* written in 2014), and Kwame Alexander (*The Crossover* written in 2015), all stand on the shoulders of Black children literary pioneers and carry on the tradition of cultural language in literature about different facets of Black life. Black children's literature for the sake of this study is defined as literature written for and about the Black experience, culture, and various narratives within the diaspora for children. Culturally authentic children's literature about Black people

leads readers to develop a nuanced understanding of them. When Black people (or any group of people for that matter) are portrayed inauthentically, it breeds phoniness, conformity to the dominant (usually white) culture and suppression of counter-narratives, all of which should be avoided and do not reflect the varied perspectives and roles within the group (Wilt et al., 2019). Black children's books that reflect this should not be seen as culturally authentic by readers. In contrast, culturally authentic children's books present the social issues of a given group accurately and honestly, and the illustrations of these types of books show an accurate cultural setting with characters appearing with different physical characteristics (Morgan, 2011).

### **Audiobook Narration Selection and AAVE**

The current literature surrounding audiobooks and their readership is sparse as best, reflective in *Research-Based Readers' Advisory* by Jessica E. Moyer, which is currently the only library information science publication that reviews research on audiobooks and audiobook advisory (Moyer & Blau, 2008). In conjunction with Moyer (2008), scholars like Stephen Abrams (2010) have published about the saliency of audiobooks and its close companion eBooks from a technology lens. While useful at the time of publication, literature such as this becomes outdated quickly due to the fast-paced nature of technology. Technology as a central backdrop for audiobooks has since been retired in favor of a more literary view that is evaluative and now includes the contribution of the narrator as much as the author. An award-winning book might result in a poorly produced audio with lackluster narration and poor technical qualities. On the other hand, a less popular title might find a great interpretation featuring a skillful narrator who raises the quality and recreates the work for the better. A truly effective audiobook maintains a perfect balance between meaningful content and faultless production values (Burkey, 2007).

The qualities of a great audiobook delineated by the Odyssey Award for Audiobook Excellence committee, which is the foremost leading authority of audiobooks in the publishing

industry, includes narration as the foundation, as the author's voice comes directly to listeners through the reading. When considering an audiobook for an award or quality, Odyssey considers all of the following (Burkey, 2007):

- The reading should be authentic and appropriate to the content, with voices that match the time period and setting of the text as well as the genders, ages, and moods of the characters.
- The reader should use well-placed inflections and tones, conveying the prose through engaging expression, emotion, and energy.
- The reader should consistently maintain and differentiate character voices, accents, and dialects. Narrative descriptions ("He murmured," for example) should be read appropriately.
- Cultures and ethnicities should be presented authentically and without stereotypes. Geographic terms, foreign terminology, and other challenging phrases and words should be pronounced correctly and with ease.

A single performer may read straightforwardly, using his or her natural voice with suitable inflection and tone, or the reader may vary his or her voice to change tone, inflection, accent, and emphasis to represent multiple characters. The reading might also be a combination of the two styles, with significant characters receiving particular emphasis. Some audios feature multiple narrators taking on specific roles and characters. Whatever the style, the narration should stay true to the spirit and context of the written word and forge a direct, personal connection with listeners.

This manner of criteria for narrator selection by the Odyssey committee suggests that in choosing narrators for audiobooks, publishers should consider authenticity and cultural



appropriateness. An example of notable books that have won Odyssey Awards in the children's literature genre that reflect the cultural standards that should be the norm in audiobook narrator selection are *Jazz* (Myers, 2008), *The Hate U Give* (Thomas, 2017), and *Elijah of Buxton* (Curtis, 2007) to name a few. Over the last ten years, audiobooks have moved from a small part of most public library collections that had a few dedicated listeners (often with long commutes) and an almost nonexistent commercial market to becoming a favorite for library patrons (Moyer, 2012). In observing this through literature, we can see a correlation between cultural authenticity and readership of library patrons that speaks to the skillfulness of narration as an art form. To fill this increasing need for audiobook readership, publishers and libraries have traditionally employed selectors (Kunzel et al., 2011). Selectors must ensure that they build collections that serve patrons seeking materials in the growing variety of formats they demand. Audiobooks are difficult to source in this manner because the most important aspect of audiobooks at times is not the stories themselves but the narrator. A good narrator, according to Kunzel et al. (2011), can transform a title into a true listening experience.

African-American Vernacular English's role in Black children's literature is important, but AAVE itself has come under scrutiny numerous times when questioned about its viability as a sophisticated language system. When announced as a language all its own by Oakland Unified School Board in 1996, linguist John Rickford, after eloquently defending the school board's decision to deem AAVE its standalone language was labeled a "disingenuous crackpot, manipulating questionable data in service of a craftily unstated Afrocentric agenda." by The New Republic accusing Rickford of having merely "gone to elaborate lengths to construct an academic superstructure that legitimates the use of slang in the classroom (McWhorter, 2000). This visceral reaction to AAVE being labeled as its language is ultimately symptomatic of the

long-held socio belief that AAVE or Black English as it was then called is broken English and not the rich cultural treasure that it is (McWhorter, 2000).

Indeed, the coding surrounding AAVE at times can be complex to deconstruct. However, by analyzing the use of AAVE in Black children's book narrations it can become easier to understand why AAVE is an urbane system with its grammar, rules, and vocal syntax, and not a concoction of slang dug up from the corner of the various ghettos (both rural and metropolitan) that where Black people stereotypically reside. This shifts the focus from the authorship to authenticity to one of skill on the narrator's part. The review of relevant literature and scholarship in Black children's literature synthesizes the current state of Black children's literature concerning AAVE; looks an example of cultural audiobook narrator selection practices though the Odyssey Awards, and ends with a brief modern history of the validity of AAVE in linguistics. Currently, no research looks at the prevalence of culturally sustaining or appropriate narration of audiobooks for Black literature. This is a gap that needs to be filled to create a well-rounded view of Black literature that encompasses literature, both textual and audio.

To conclude, a conclusive body of scholarship that views the audiobook genre, Black children's literature, AAVE is sorely needed. Although Individual bodies of scholarship (Black children's literature, audiobook research, AAVE linguistics studies) present vast stores of information from which we can mine, a disconnect persists between the three disciplines. This gap in scholarship illuminates the still present misconceptions about AAVE and its narration in Black children's audiobooks. By highlighting this gap though literature and the existing audiobook narration selective practice of the Odyssey Awards, AAVE can thus be realized in nuancedly in audiobook narration performances.

### **CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY**

Few theories have been proposed to explain what motivates audiobook narrator selection within Black children's audiobook literature. This chapter focuses on five major theoretical frameworks that guide and frame this work. These are: Black Authorship, Black Authenticity, Ownership, Africanist Theory, and Critical Race Theory. Although these theories, particularly Critical Race Theory, are often concentrated within disciplines outside of audiobook scholarship, the researcher seeks to primarily focus on their application to audiobook narrative practices. In addition, the research methods used to conduct this study are explained.

#### **Black Authorship, Authenticity and Ownership**

Black creators must be able to tell their stories and the stories of their communities their way for it to be authentic, and the use of AAVE is an integral part of that. Children's literature benefits from this because it shows Black culture in its pure form (Mikkelsen, 1998).

Authenticity connects readers of all ethnicities to a text and makes it more relatable. From language to illustrations, representation in children's literature for Black children means a great deal as it has the power to shape how they view themselves and how the world views them and their culture. For context sake, positive representation in children's literature for Black Authorship will mean representation that caters to the authentic image of Black people, culture, and community.

This overwhelmingly would refer to the quality of audiobook narrative performances and narrator selection practices. An authentic image of "Black" will show facets of life presented in a way which gives respect and clarity to a rich culture, yet complex. Its antithesis of whiteness best defines conversations about what is deemed Black and what is not. Whiteness uses Blackness to promote further and articulate what whiteness is and does so in a manner that rather consistently

demeans and belittles Blackness. The focus of positive representation within Black children's literature narration performances will include both Black Authenticity and Black Authorship.

Black Authenticity is the quality of being authentic within Black culture and Blackness. Black Authenticity can be translated to text, places, fashion, traditions, etc. that are curated and originated by and for Black people at its core and practice. The culture it resides in can be African, Caribbean, or several other cultures that are Black. Black Authenticity frames black Authorship. Black Authorship is a text created by someone who is Black to showcase Black culture, life, and thought. The need for authenticity as it pertains to the Black experience in Children's Literature is a seemingly obvious one to voice due to the rise of books featuring characters of color. Influences that define what authenticity in Black Authorship looks like are publishing practices (the business of writing), ownership (who can tell Black stories), and what does important authenticity looks like (examples from the pioneers and current authors).

Ownership is also a crucial part of authenticity within the realm of Black Authorship. In writing, stories that are a part of Black culture are often co-opted and distorted without input from members of the Black community. A historical example of this is the Brer Rabbit tales, which originated as trickster tales from West Africa and were then repackaged into the Disney sing-along *Song of the South* (Disney, Foster, & Jackson, 1947). Alice Walker expressed her disappointment in the passing out of Black heritage, stating the Uncle Remus Disney character: "Saw fit largely to ignore his children and grandchildren in order to pass on our heritage indeed, our birthright to patronizing white children" (Mikkelsen, 1998, p. 34). This justifiable feeling of ownership of what is culturally yours creates authentic storytelling because you will treat what is yours, whether it be art or stories with great care.

While it is acceptable for non-Black authors to include Black characters in their stories, or even at times write a conventional narrative (first day of school, going to the store, etc.) about them, it must be acknowledged that certain cultural connotations can only be fully expressed and achieved in children's literature by Black people. Historically, despite the complex and extensively documented history of Blacks in America, their oral storytelling traditions have not been traveled enough to reveal the depth of their overall significance within children's literature (Bank-Wallace, 2002). Similar to Black Authenticity, the storytelling style is more about how a story is told versus who is telling the story. Various techniques such as spoken word poetry, and gifted narration akin to African storytelling traditions would be lost to non-Black authors who would struggle to capture the essence of Black storytelling fully. Participation in those customs requires its participants to be a combination of being Black and knowledgeable about storytelling history in Black culture. Storytelling styles have long been the subject of cultural value in the Black community. Different storytelling mediums provide historical and cultural impact to authentic storytelling and Black Authorship that cannot be gained by mimicry alone from non-white authors. The book *Hey Black Child* (Perkins & Collier, 2019) uses the spoken word style of poetry, which emphasizes emotional, expressive performances as evident in the imagery in the book. This poetry style is undeniably Black in its storytelling origins.

The role of the narrator is also given cultural context through Black Authorship. The oral tradition of storytelling within Black culture began as an informal social event where men, women, and children would engage with one another after a meal. Favorite among these stories were the Brer Rabbit tales (Newman, 1994). Channeling the same excitement and engagement of traditional oral storytelling, *Reading Rainbow*, a children's television show created by Levar Burton places emphasis on stylized black narrations based on the books chosen for a particular

episode (Wood & Duke, 1997). Case in point is the narration of the book *Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters: An African Tale* (Step toe, 1987) in episode 10. Phylicia Rashad, a Black woman who has ancestral connections to the African continent, narrates this story. He has done these numerous times with other books based on Black culture as well as Latin and Asian cultures. Burton was purposeful in always selecting narrators whose identity or culture lined up with the book featured for the weeks' episode to bring awareness to the importance of authenticity in oral storytelling.

Black Authenticity, Black Authorship, and Ownership will be important framing themes for the author's analysis of AAVE and narrative selection moving forward in this qualitative analysis. Their importance stems from their ability to elucidate the theories in this study: Critical Race Theory and Africanist Theory. Critical Race Theory and Africanist Theory both will further explain the need for a cultural narrative selection matrix and lay the groundwork for theoretical validity in audiobook narration of AAVE.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework in the social sciences, developed out of epistemic philosophy, that uses critical theory to examine society and culture as they relate to categorizations of race, law, and power (Yosso, 2005) (Gordon, 1999). Critical Race Theory, created in part by Patricia Williams, Richard Delgado, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Derrick Bell, is marked by its focus on "marginalized" communities and the use of the alternative methodology in the expression of theoretical work, and other literary techniques to dismantle the white normative power structure (Gordon, 1999). Critical Race Theory's genesis is first hinged on the notion that racism is "normal," not an aberrant, in American society (Ladson-Billing, 1998). The acknowledgment of racism as "normal" versus an aberration allows CRT scholars to unmask and expose racism in its various facades. In support of this acknowledgment, it is salient to mention

that race continues to be significant in explaining inequity in the United States (Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995). However, both class and gender can and do intersect race; as stand-alone variables, they are not powerful enough to explain all of the differences apparent between whites and people of color (Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995).

Secondly, Critical Race Theory uses parables or stories to analyze the myths and received wisdoms that make up common culture about race that render Blacks and other racially marginalized groups as sub-par (Ladson-Billing, 1998). Delgado (1989) suggests that there are at least three reasons for naming one's reality in legal discourse that support the uses of stories within CRT. In essence, much of reality is socially constructed, stories provide members of outgroups a vehicle for psychic self-preservation, and the exchange of stories from teller to listener can help overcome ethnocentrism and the dysconscious conviction of viewing the world in one way (Ladson-Billing & Tate, 1995). Furthermore, Critical Race Theory poses a strong critique of liberalism (Ladson-Billing, 1998). The liberal perspective of the “civil rights crusade as a long, slow, but always upward pull, is flawed because it fails to understand the limits of current legal paradigms to catalyze social change and its emphasis on incrementalism defined as a belief in or advocacy of change by degrees (Crenshaw, 1998, p. 1334). CRT argues that racism requires sweeping changes, but liberalism has no mechanism for such change (Ladson-Billing, 1998).

Lastly, CRT poses the argument that whites have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation, using affirmative action as an example (Ladson-Billing, 1998). These four cornerstones of Critical Race Theory affirm the author's usage of it as a viable theoretical framework to analyze audiobook narration performances because race plays a large part in the analytical examination of audiobook narration performances. *Black Authorship and Black*

Authenticity suggest, along with CRT, the need for nuance in audiobook narration performances and narrator selections. Blackness is not a monolith, and it requires numerous views, voices, and experiences to create cultural substance.

Critical Race Theory, originally rooted in the legal field, also lends itself well in the field of education, which deeply suits the analysis of narration performances in audiobooks in Black children's literature. Scholars such as Gloria Ladson-Billings, William Tate, and Edward Taylor, expanded Critical Race Theory into education and highlighted several defining elements like control, manipulation, and silencing used to establish and maintain power systems that favor the dominant group (Ladson-Billing, 1998). The connection between educational uses of CRT and analysis of current audiobook narrative selection practices are relatively easy to establish. Since education is one of the few social functions delegated to individual states to legislate and enact laws designed to proscribe the "contours of education" (Taylor et al., 2009, p. 24), it would be plausible to view audiobook narration selection practices in the same vein as education, subjective and controlled by individual members, and not a cohesive, unified body informed by cultural nuances within Blackness.

Critical Race Theory in education also suggests that current instructional strategies presume African-American students to be deficient compared to their white counterparts (Ladson-Billing, 1998). The assumptions of the inferiority paradigm have not been limited to discussions by the educational research community. The assumed intellectual inferiority of African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, and other people of color also have a long history in the legal discourse of the United States (Tate, 1997). This suggestion has the consequence of educators constantly searching for the right strategies and tools to deal with or rather control Black students (Ladson-Billing, 1998). The insistent need for control over Black



children in education mirrors the need for control of Black culture through audiobook narrative selection practices. It complicates Black Authenticity and Black Authorship within Black children's literature. In making this connection, the author has better access to the need for authentic Black storytelling and how critically, this impacts narration performances of AAVE.

In shaping law and education, Critical Race Theory would be devoid of a structure without its foundational core beliefs or tenets. An essential dimension of Critical Race Theory is that it is tenet counter-storytelling or the narrative. Counter-storytelling is a foundational CRT tenet defined as "a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told" (Solorzano, Daniel, & Yosso, 2002). The purpose of counter-storytelling within CRT is bilateral in how it applies to audiobook narrator performances. First, it redirects the dominant gaze to make it see from a new point of view what has been there all along (Taylor et al., 2009). By redirecting the dominant gaze or voice in the case of narration to acknowledge stories in Black children's literature, we bring attention to the importance of those stories. Acknowledging these stories would also require us to acknowledge the use of white supremacist master scripting. White supremacist master scripting is defined as the silencing of multiple voices and perspectives, in favor of primary legitimizing dominant, white, upper-class, male voicings as standard knowledge students need to know (Ladson-Billing, 1998). This use of master scripting means that Black stories are erased and muted when they challenge dominant authority and power. Thus, the use of AAVE narrations in stories such as the Brer Rabbit tales are reduced to incoherent, vacuous folk stories of enslaved peoples instead of clever documentation of Black history and skillful oral accounts of Black life during slavery using characters that represent the sheer will to survive in less than favorable circumstances. Narrating these stories in authentic AAVE serves to add the legitimacy that is deserved in Black children's literature and its

audiobook narrations. In bringing attention to stories within Black children's literature, we gain a better understanding of the nuanced narratives of Black people from Black people themselves versus a narrative from whites that is a master-scripted substitution used to silence and legitimize white dominance (Ladson-Billing, 1998).

Second, counter-storytelling is purposeful in refuting notions of merit and colorblindness (Taylor et al., 2009). By insisting on narrative rhetoric that disallows reference to race or the nuances of race, groups affected by racism cannot name their reality or point out racism without invoking denial and offense in whites (Taylor et al., 2009). Akin to education, CRT holds the promise to inform audiobook narration choices. CRT's oppositional character gives voice to otherwise unspoken realities. (Taylor et al., 2009, pp. 9). Counter-stories can be used to expose, analyze, as well as challenge deeply entrenched narratives and characterizations of racial privilege by putting a human face to the experiences of often-marginalized groups. By telling and hearing counter-stories, members of marginalized groups gain healing from becoming familiar with their historical oppression and victimization, realize that they are not alone, that others have the same thoughts and experiences, stop blaming themselves for their marginal position, and construct additional counter-stories to challenge the dominant story (Hughes-Hassell, 2013) (Delgado, 1989).

Constructing counter stories to challenge the dominant story though the voice is why studying the use of AAVE in audiobook narration performances vital to the study. In promoting counter-storytelling in audiobook narrative performances, it is more than just the simple assignment of a "Black narrator" to a "Black book." It is looking at the cultural capital (stories) that the narrator carries into the spaces of the books they are selected to narrate. Through the

narration of AAVE, Black narrators can dispel the myth that AAVE lacks sophistication and instead showcase its cultural regality and rigorous linguistic attributes.

### **Africanism**

The creation of Africanism in American literature formed due to the long-believed claim that the presence of Africans and later Black Americans did not affect or influence American Literature, which was (and still is to a degree) overtly white and male. Evidence to support the fallacy in this claim can be found in the shaping of the American constitution, culture, and how Blackness and the condition of Black people through various points in American history have collided with the interest of the U.S.

Morrison's immediate critiques analyze Mark Twain and his use of Africanism to define his white characters in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain, 1902). Huckleberry Finn would not be a defined character and have nuance had it not been for the pretense of Jim, the slave character in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Finn's relationship toward Jim highlights "the parasitic nature of white freedom" (pg. 57). That is, Blacks must be enslaved for whites to be free.

Morrison's critique of American literature supports the claim that language and overarchingly Black Authorship and Authenticity are all measured through the white gaze of the literature publishing industry; thus, this gaze, along with counter storytelling, is crucial in dissecting the use of AAVE narration in audiobooks. The same argument can be made about the use of AAVE juxtaposed against the standard English language. Historically, AAVE has been the "Jim" in comparison to Finn's widely perceived "better English." The dependency on Africanism by white writers, or in this case, a majority white publishing conglomerate, and the inborn authentic Black Authorship birthed from Black authors is a fascinating lens to view AAVE audiobook narrations through and juxtapose. One depends on the white perception of the

Black voice via text and narration using Black narrators, and the other uses the nuance, richness, and complexity of Black culture and meaning in a way that cannot be accomplished by the former using the voice of the Black diaspora.

Morrison's sub-theme "Defining Americanness," which is expounded upon in her lectures (Morison, 1992), gives support to the argument that the American publishing industry is ill-equipped to select audiobook narrators that are matched to a book past that of race. For example, editors in a big publishing company situated in a large metropolitan city in the U.S. know enough not to select a white narrator to narrate a book that is steeped in Black culture such as *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2015), but may not have the cultural awareness to select a narrator who is expert in the spoken-word or Hip-Hop tradition. The narrator simply being Black is enough to satisfy Americanness, meaning that Black people at a minimal level are relegated to represent Blackness when it benefits the standard white majority. This point translates to the practice of Black people being only selected to tell their stories at the behest of a white majority because it typically better accommodates the publishing company's bottom line.

### **Audiobooks Selected for Analysis**

In the sampling of 32 books, the researcher included a book selection that spanned over 50 years of Black children's literature and moved the genre forward (by author recognition/impact, awards, best-seller list, cultural/historical importance). The books were sourced using notable book award list and best-sellers list. Scholarship in the Black children's literary field that listed classic and contemporary books highlighted for their literary impact and merit was also used (McNair, 2010). Then, out of this sampling, books that were not written by a Black author were omitted. Further narrowing down the analysis choices, books that did not have an accompanying audiobook were omitted. Lastly, from the remaining books which equaled about one-fourth of the original sample size of 32 books, books that did not use a substantial

amount of AAVE were not considered. Substantial AAVE usage is defined by the frequency of appearance of the book. AAVE should appear at least in every other page in a picture book or within a chapter, if applicable.

An example of this is in *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 1986). AAVE appears on the second page of the book and continues until the end of the book. As a rule, only books with accompanying audiobooks that featured one or two narrators were considered. Books with accompanying audiobooks that had a multicast narration (three or more) were not considered in the books sampled. In narrowing down books for analysis, only five books fit the qualitative analysis criteria which are: 1) written by an author of African descent, 2) has an accompanying audiobook<sup>1</sup>, 3) employs an adequate use of AAVE for narrators to narrate, and 4) advanced the Black children's literature genre in a meaningful way. The books selected were as follows: *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2015), *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 1986), *Jazz* (Myers, 2008), *The People Could Fly* (Hamilton, 1986), and *The Tales of Uncle Remus: The Adventures of Brer Rabbit* (Lester, 1987). In addressing the limitations of this study, a small sampling of books was used, so the titles in the sampling are not fully representative of the titles that encompass the full range of Black children's literature.

### AAVE Analysis

Along with the book selection matrix, a matrix to analyze the performance of AAVE for the selected analysis books was created. In each audiobook was listened to for individual

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<sup>1</sup> Must have an audiobook that is available through Audible, Libby, or Overdrive. To analyze narrative selection practices in the publishing industry. Overdrive and Libby are free audiobook apps that are accessible for persons who have access to a library and library borrowing privileges through a local library of their choosing. Audible is the world's largest producer of downloadable audiobooks acquired by Amazon (Maloney, 2016). Other forms of audiobook recordings of books outside of the three authorized apps such as YouTube videos and podcasts will not be considered as they tend to be plagued with copyright issues, unauthorized narrations by the current publisher and rights holder of the selected books.

linguistic examples that were organized under a broader linguistic system. The system of linguistic coding called the Hierarchical Model of Speech Features employed in Mehrabani and Hansen's (2015) study of Arabic dialects, as well as a corpus of South Indian languages, details the mechanisms of syntactical, phonological, lexical components of speech. Although their focus of dialectical study differs from mine, their analytical method proved consistent for the African-American Vernacular English examples analyzed within the selected books due to its mirroring of speech components already present in AAVE.

The phonological component of the Hierarchical Model of Speech Features defined as proximity between dialects will be informed by scholar and linguist John McWhorter's definition of phonological intonation pattern or "melody," which characterizes even the most "neutral" or light African-American accent (McWhorter, 2017). Green (2001) also supports McWhorter's AAVE definitive phonology, agreeing that a handful of multisyllabic words in AAVE differ from general American English in their stress placement so that, for example, "police," "guitar," and "Detroit" are pronounced with initial stress instead of ultimate stress.

In addition to the "melody" of accents, rural versus urban variations of AAVE as it pertains to the culture of the narrated text plays a notable role in how a narrator presents an audiobook. The structural differences between the variations of dialects found and grammatical differences within syntax structure, all represent the syntactical arm of the Hierarchical Model of Speech Features. African-American Vernacular English began with mostly rural and southern dialects. Yet, today's accents mostly reside within an urban context and are nationally widespread, with urban features diffusing into traditionally rural variations (Wolfram, 2004).

The lexical component of the Hierarchical Model of Speech Features defines word and phrase selection. While AAVE shares most of its lexicon with other varieties of English, most

notably southern English, AAVE over the years has created its unique definitive subjugation of traditional words (e.g., "kitchen" defining hair near or on the nape of the neck or "dig" meaning to understand something) and creations of new one such as "siditty" meaning snobbish (Smitherman, 2000). In the books selected, the unique use of vocabulary and AAVE terminology was analyzed as well.

In completing the analysis, the researcher read through the five selected books that fit the qualitative analysis criteria. By reading through each book, a sense of the culture unique to each book was gained and noted any areas that would be useful during the examination of the accompanying audiobook. Foundational research on each author and narrator was conducted. This research included focusing on their positionality, identities that informed their narrating style, and possible regional influences within AAVE. Once the initial book, narrator, and author research was done, each audiobook was listened to in its entirety. *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 2005) was the shortest, clocking in at thirteen minutes and forty-three seconds, and *The Tales of Uncle Remus: The Adventures of Brer Rabbit* (Lester, 1987) was the longest at three hours and forty-eight minutes. During the listening of each audiobook, the researcher took notes and organized notes based on the Hierarchical Model of Speech Features. Lastly, the best representation of AAVE narration by the narrator, if any at all, was used to produce the findings in the study.

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

In this chapter, the author report the findings from my analysis of each of the five focal texts underpinned by the need to call to attention the use of AAVE within Black children's audiobooks and the way it is narrated in the audiobook genre. The questions of how African-American Vernacular English is narrated in Black children's literature audiobook performances, and how do narrator selection practices complicate authenticity and authorship within Black children's literature are answered by the analytical findings of each book represented with respects to Black Authorship and Black Authenticity.

### The Crossing

*The Crossover* (Alexander, 2015) is the story of African-American twin brothers who navigate life through their shared love for basketball. Told entirely in verse, *The Crossover* uses elements of Hip Hop, Spoken Word, and Jazz to tell the story of family and perseverance. The main characters' close ties to Hip-Hop and Jazz heavily influence their usage of AAVE in terms of syntax, phonology, and lexicon. The narrator's phonological use of melody in an African-American accent, as defined by McWhorter, is lacking. When listening to the audiobook of *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2014), you can hear the distinct staccato flow of the narrator (Corey Allen) when he speaks. It can be heard as jarring and a little off-putting if the listener is situated within the Hip Hop culture that the narrator is attempting to portray. Hip Hop's lyrical style is best defined by the word "flow," meaning that the words and lyrics flow from one phrase, one word, and one thought to another in various patterns and cadences defined most commonly by Hip Hop Artist Rakim (Kool Moe Dee, 2003). The lack of Hip Hop flow in the narration style makes the audiobook performance of *The Crossover* (Alexander, 20014) sounds inauthentic even though the narrator is Black.



Another layer of culture that is overlooked from a phonological viewpoint is youth culture. Hip Hop is the youngest and last original musical art form created in the U.S (Onion, Mullen, & Sullivan, 2009). Since Hip Hop is so young in both the history and the people it attracts, it would make sense to select a narrator who would be able to convey the youthfulness of Hip Hop. A young reader who is drawn to this book because of its references to basketball and Hip Hop would, arguably, be able to tell that this narrator is not comfortable with Hip Hop culture due to their lack of flow in the narration. This book's narrator would have been better equipped for narration with a spoken word or Hip-Hop background to encompass the cultural aspects of the text fully.

In addition to the lack of melody and flow in narration, the narrator cannot also apply certain stresses as it applies to the phonological and lexical components of the book. The use of AAVE vocabulary, although written in standard English, should have been narrated with respect to AAVE as performed in Hip Hop culture. Allen does not narrate the realization of final ng /ŋ/, the velar nasal, as the alveolar nasal [n] in function morphemes and content morphemes with two or more syllables like -ing. For example, crunking is intended to be pronounced in the AAVE tradition as “crunkin” and so forth with flossing pronounced as “flossin” (Alexander, 2015, pg 2) (Green, 2002). Realization of /ŋ/ as [n] in these contexts is commonly found in many other English dialects but is at home in AAVE. In not acknowledging the realization of /ŋ/ as [n] in the narration of *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2014), Allen falls short of presenting Black Authenticity through the narration of AAVE.

Two different forms of AAVE (culturally) were spoken in this book, one from the twin boys (AAVE in Hip Hop) and one from the father (AAVE situated in Jazz culture). There was not very much variation from the narrator to distinguish the difference between the two. Again,

this ties back to the issue of culture and the lack of it. Comparatively to *Jazz* (Myers, 2008), another book that was analyzed in this study, the narrators of that book are a part of the Jazz culture, and their narration styles honor that. In *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2015), the narration of Jazz vocabulary and accent (phonological) sounds inauthentic. The lexical components of the narration of *The Crossover* are fair in that they narrate quite a few vocabulary words that are unique to AAVE situated in Hip Hop and Jazz culture but lack phonological prowess making them fall flat and lose implicit meaning. The subtle nuances of accent and syntax structure essentially make the narration of *The Crossover* fall short in the realm of Black authenticity by way of culture.

### **The People Could Fly**

*The People Could Fly* (Hamilton, 1986) is a collection for twenty-four folktales retold by Virginia Hamilton. The book is broken down into four sections: Animal tales, Fairy Tales, Supernatural Tales, and Tales of the enslaved Africans (including slave narratives). Textually, Hamilton's use of AAVE is reflective of the more modernized and readable dialect that reflects the expressiveness of the original enslaved teller, and later the free Black (Hamilton, 1986). This allows room for storytellers to embellish and decorate the storytelling style to their taste and audience. The narrator (Andrew Barnes) does a great job of taking advantage of the freedom that the AAVE gives its storyteller and creates a vocal experience that speaks well to his stage and operatic background.

Overall, Barnes hits each point in the Hierarchical Model of Speech Features model. First, his phonological use of various southern accents in both men and women is impressive. Barnes was able to capture the subtle nuances in gendered accents in a way that was both entertaining and respectful to the original text. Barnes's phonological usage of the AAVE dialect by a narrator is best displayed in the story John and the Devil's daughter (Hamilton, 2005, Ch 3,

00:35). In the story, Barnes narrates the original tale written by Hamilton but incorporates various voice and accent changes to convey the nuances in AAVE dialect, through gender. Her gender informs the witch lady's accent (Hamilton, 2005, Ch 3, 1:12) in southern and. Barnes changes the inflections of his voice to match that of a southern Black woman.

In comparison, Barnes leans into a broad melodic southern accent, which is indicative of John's male voice, deep and baritone. Syntax methods of AAVE are also shown in the narration (Hamilton, 2005, Ch 3, 5:09):

The Devil: "did you do my work the way I said?"

John de Conquer: "It got done."

The Devil: "Not bad. Pretty good."

The syntax pattern "It got done" is indicative of an optional tense system with at least four aspects of the past tense and two aspects of the future tense (Fickett, 1972, p.17-18). Other stories such as "*Bruh Alligator Meets Trouble*" rely on lexical dialect from different parts of the Black diaspora to carry the tale. "*Bruh Alligator Meets Trouble*" uses the Gullah dialect, a combination of American, West Indian, English, and African languages (Hamilton, 1986). The tale uses vocabulary such as swinge (sing), buckras (white people), and yeddy (hear).

The historical and cultural relevance of *The People Could Fly* lends itself well to the audiobook narration of AAVE. The flow and melody of the narration of each story are to be noted as well. There is little to no staccato in the flow of each story, and Barnes moves seamlessly between his narrator's standard English and the various AAVE dialects of the multiple characters. Black dialectical authenticity could be contested in Barnes' portrayal of certain AAVE dialects (Caribbean and Gullah) because it is not known if he is representative of these spaces.

### **The Tales of Uncle Remus: The Adventure of Brer Rabbit**

*The Tales of Uncle Remus: The Adventures of Brer Rabbit* (Lester, 1987) is a retelling of the Brer Rabbit tales popularized by Joel Chandler Harris. Lester's positionality as an academic and folklorist influences his narration of the tales. His phonetic approach to the narration is best described as "folksy." It is not as melodic as a deep rolling southern accent. However, it is in its proximity from the southern AAVE dialect that brings something fresh to the table without sounding like a weak imitation of a southern accent and dialect. This folksiness places emphasis on the genre of the tales versus the locative nature of the tales. This is interesting to note because although Lester used a modernized AAVE dialect in his tales that are traditionally situated in the south, his narration of AAVE is not solely adhering to the vocal and accent patterns of the south.

Lester uses a light African-American accent (McWhorter, 2017) to retell the stories in his unique way, and oddly it fits especially well. In the narration of AAVE, this is an example of the exception to the analytical rule concerning regional dialect and how it matches with the AAVE in the various stories researched in this text. Typically, the accent is expected to match the dialect, but in this case, the tales retold by Lester are not attempting to be "southern" because they already are. The tales are already understood to be southern; thus, they do not require an accent to convey this. They are presented as stories that have historical significance to American and Black literary history without the veil of southern vocal patterns attached to them aside from the use of lexical vocabulary that is true to the south. Regarding Black Authenticity, the tales are still required to be told by someone Black even though a signifying accent was not readily used.

Similar to Hamilton's use of written AAVE in *The People Could Fly* (1986), Lester's use of AAVE was open enough so that any storyteller could embellish and tailor the tales to their storytelling style. Lester does this to connect to readers and listeners by using modern AAVE and modern pop culture references such as clothing brands (e.g., Adidas). The syntactical structure of

tales are expressive and convey sound effects using repeated onomatopoeia (grammar component) such as “Bam, Bam, Blamity, Blam” when Brer Wolf knocks on Brer Rabbit’s door, throughout the book, which Lester narrates with great energy (Lester, 2014, Ch. 8, 1:13). Examples of Lester’s narration of syntax and grammatical structure is best exemplified in “Brer Wolf Tries to Catch Brer Rabbit” (Lester, 1987, pg. 30) (Lester, 2014, Ch. 8, 1:13). In this narration, the narrator’s positionality played the biggest role in how AAVE is performed. This was not something that was readily expected. The only positionality that was expecting was cultural positionality that was regional (i.e., Southern positionality). Lester’s background as a folk singer and academic present two new subcultures to consider when analyzing AAVE narration through culture.

### **Jazz**

*Jazz* (Myers, 2008) is a children’s book that is an ode to the musical genre of Jazz. It is told in small vignettes or verses that highlight famous Jazz musicians, regional and global Jazz history, and musical components of the genre. The narration of *Jazz* (Myers, Myers, Williams, & Thomas, 2019) is the most unique of all the analyzed books. The narrators of *Jazz* are situated within Jazz culture and make for perfect narrators. Their positionality speaks loudly to the claim that culture should heavily influence narrator selections for Black children’s audiobooks.

For a book like *Jazz* to come alive as an audiobook, the narrators must be both Black (representative of the musical artform) and be members of Jazz culture. The audiobook uses music to enhance the narration performance. *The People Could Fly* (Hamilton, 1986), *The Tales of Uncle Remus: The Adventures of Brer Rabbit* (Lester, 1987), and *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 1986) all use music, but with *Jazz*, music is as much of a narrator as Williams and Thomas. Music is personified, changing with the emotion of each vignette and comes alive to

represent musical AAVE in Black culture. Music plays a massive role in Black culture, which is why The Crossover not capitalizing on the combination of Hip Hop and Jazz culture was notable.

In *Jazz* (Myers, 2019), Williams and Thomas, both singer-songwriters, complement each other's styles of narration, queuing each other into their singing style. This is the only book in the analysis that featured two narrators, and they work so well together to convey the use of AAVE in the book. Phonological methods of language are highlighted in the sing-song dialect that is more cultural than regional. The musical genre of Jazz is such a mixture of different dialects, musical variation, and tones that it would be impossible to pinpoint it to one part of the U.S or the world. The same can be said for Williams and Thomas's narrator's performances. Their dialect is a mixture that is representative of Jazz music and its origins on the African continent and in the United States (Myers, 2008).

The lexical value of *Jazz* (Myers, 2008) is located in the vocabulary words unique to Jazz culture, which Myers detailed in a glossary that is located at the end of the book with the assistance of Dr. Daniel Burwasser (Myers, 2008). This implies the intention of teaching readers about Jazz culture rather than just a narration about the genre. The teaching aspect of dialect is also present in Hamilton's book. After each story, she supplies references and glossaries as needed to inform as well as entertain.

While all portions of *Jazz* (Myers, 2019) showcase the cultural knowledge and skill of Williams and Thomas, they shine the brightest in "Good-Bye To Old Bob Johnson" (Myers, 2019, 13:17). In "Good-Bye to Old Bob Johnson," the narration is of Bob Johnson's Jazz funeral defined as a funeral procession accompanied by a brass band, in the tradition of New Orleans, Louisiana. This practice was combined with African spiritual practices, specifically the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria and other parts of West Africa. Jazz funerals are also heavily influenced by early

twentieth-century African American Protestant and Catholic churches, Black brass bands, and the idea of celebrating after death in order to please the spirits who protect the dead. Another group that has influenced jazz funerals is the Mardi Gras Indians (Turner, 2009).

In this vignette, Williams and Thomas sing and narrate along with the somber brass band, describing the funeral procession of Bob Johnson. Their mixture of singing and narration, along with the music, makes for a visual picture of a cultural component of Jazz and how it is incorporated with people's lives even in their death. Williams and Thomas sing and narrate in a tribute of sorts to Bob Johnson, and this tribute is the connective piece of culture with AAVE that makes *Jazz* (Myers, 2019) a great audiobook for showcasing cultural AAVE narration.

### **Flossie and the Fox**

*Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 2005) is a story about a girl named Flossie, who takes some eggs to a neighbor and, along the way, meets a fox and manages to outwit it. *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 2005) features AAVE in the southern tradition. The story surprisingly (or maybe intentionally) uses dialectal variation (syntactic and phonological) to highlight the socio-cultural importance of AAVE as a sophisticated dialect by making the seemingly simple yet bright Black girl use AAVE and the trickster/seemingly intelligent fox use proper standard English. At the end of the story, the little girl outwits the fox. She gives a knowing wink, revealing to the reader that she knew all along with the ruse she had created using syntactical wordplay and the social stigma surrounding AAVE (more accurately southern AAVE) to her advantage.

McKissack (the author) is the narrator of this story, and her southern background plays a significant role in informing her use of AAVE and storytelling technique. The melody and cadence of the AAVE used was natural and was not staccato compared to *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2014). This is because the narrator is within southern Black culture and is

knowledgeable of the nuances of AAVE speech. Phonetically, this narrator is pleasing to the ear and eyes because there is no disconnect between the written dialect and verbal dialect. For example, if a child were to follow along with the physical book and audiobook collectively, they would be in for a linguistic treat.

Books like *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 1986) do a great job of introducing child readers to AAVE because the author writes the AAVE in the story, and in the audiobook, the narration of the AAVE is done in a way that makes the dialect malleable for young minds to understand. A great example of the combination of syntactical and phonological levels of analysis is the narration (both written and verbal) of the fox attempting to prove to Flossie that he is indeed a fox (McKissack, 2005, 5:46) (McKissack, 1986):

Fox: “I have proof,” he said. “See, I have thick, luxurious fur. Feel for yourself.”

Flossie: “Ummm. Feels like rabbit fur to me,” she says to Fox. “Shucks! You aine no Fox. You a rabbit, all the time trying to fool me.”

The syntactical structure of the sentence “You aine no Fox. You a rabbit, all the time trying to fool me.” showcases the present tense examples (you a rabbit) you typically see in AAVE. The syntactical negatives (You aine no Fox) are formed differently from most other varieties of English (Howe & Walker, 2000). A lexical example of the mastery of AAVE by McKissack is the insertion of vocabulary that is mainly utilized and subjugated in southern AAVE. Words and terminology such as Big mama, Mrs. (Narrated as Miz), disremember, reckon, heap, Sho’ (instead of sure), ‘cep’n (in place of except), and confidencer (which can mean convincer of someone who is arrogant) are all performed in a way that delineates a strong southern narration background. This could not have been masterfully conducted unless the author fits the criteria of Black authenticity for AAVE dialect as it connects to this story (Black



and southern) and Authorship (written and created by a Black person). According to the analysis, this narration is the best out of the five books because it has a strong combination of syntactical, phonological, and lexical elements that showcase Black authenticity and Authorship at its peak.

## CHAPTER 5. DISSCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

As discovered in the findings, certain books perform better than others in leveraging AAVE for narrative purposes. In leveraging AAVE in audiobook narration, it is salient that the discussion of nuance in accents, the addition of music, and narrator positionality be reconciled. Likewise, the implication of the findings which address the nature of the publishing industry, and the convergence of this nature to improve narrator selection and audiobook availability based on the qualitative analysis criteria, all conclude the purpose of the study.

### Nuance in Accent

The nuance in accents that were represented in the audiobook narrator performance findings is crucial in making connections between Black children's literature narrations and the cultural importance of AAVE in Black children's literature. The fascination of accents and what they mean to a group of people is meaningful and vital to Black children's literature narration. It can reflect generational, cultural, and historical links to a people's relationship with language. For example, the narration of *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2014) could be significantly enhanced by displaying the cultural and generational link between the main characters and their father through the accent.

Allen's narration of *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2014) is staccato and mostly void of any accent indicators. It is monotone. This could be due to his vocal style. Allen is straightforward in his narration delivery of *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2014) to the point of seemingly avoiding all chances to improvise within the given culture of the book, which is youthful, current, modern, and Hip Hop. This style of narration can adversely influence the use of accent in stories because it encourages the narrator to stay "safe," not taking chances, or make meaningful, nuanced connections using different accents. He excels in evoking emotional range in his narration, but it

does not connect as deeply as it could have if he had been more masterful or mindful with accent. The narration choice of Allen by the publisher is a missed opportunity to emphasize the collaborative and influential nature that Jazz has had on Hip Hop. This symbolizes the father's massive influence on his sons that showcases the importance of the generational aspects of culture and AAVE usage. The accents of the twin brothers, representative of Hip Hop culture, and their father's culture influenced by Jazz would have been a treat to hear coming from a narrator that could have successfully mastered both accents.

Comparatively, In *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 2005), the nuance in accent delineates an important historical point that has plagued AAVE since its inception, and that is whether or not AAVE denotes stereotypes about Black people, identifying negative social status. McKissack's narration of *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 2005) gives the fox a noticeable accent that teeters on aristocratic while using standard English. This narrator's contrast between Flossie's and Fox's accents is a sly nod to the fixed notion of intellect being only attributed to standard English and the social caste that speaks it. Foxes, who in multiple texts such as the Uncle Remus tales of both Lester (1987) and Harris (1917), are depicted as sly, skillful, witty, and deceptive animals. The animistic qualities of foxes match perfectly with standard English's superior linguistic accent stereotypes.

In contrast to the fox, the narrator portrays Flossie's accent as southern, simplistic, and riddled with AAVE. Flossie's accent and command of the English language by the narrator have distinct geographical, socio-economic, and social status indicators that deem her accent and use of AAVE as subpar compared to Fox. As historically reflected in classic Black children's literature co-opted by white authors, the use of AAVE is not evidence of important cultural heritage, but the butt of a punishing social joke. The joke is that Black people are simply not

capable of great feats of intellect due to their command of the English language. They are dumb, slow-witted, and simpletons at best. McKissack's narration of Flossie reflects subversion in the accentual history of Blacks. It presents a strong example of how the historical background of AAVE affiliated accents can be used without reducing Black accents to a stereotype. Black Authenticity is not sacrificed in Flossie and the Fox. It is uplifted and celebrated. We find that McKissack's masterful accented narration of "Flossie" has bested the "Fox" in the end.

### **Music Matters**

A soundtrack can, in and of itself, be an additional narrator in audiobooks. The discovery of this notion was surprising and again reflective of the necessity of Black Authenticity in Black children's literature. The presence of musical elements or a soundtrack throughout the story appeared in four of the selected books from the findings. The only book that lacked a soundtrack or any music at all was *The Crossover* (Alexander, 2014). Music can enhance the narrator's style of storytelling and make their voice more situated in the culture of the book they are narrating. A moving soundtrack contributes to the authenticity of the book.

In *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 2005), we see masterful elements of narration with music that makes this book one of the best of the bunch. The soundtrack in *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 2005) represented southern music using traditional southern instruments such as the banjo and fiddle to narrate various happenings in the story such as the Fox feeling insulted, Flossie's perceived ignorance at the knowledge of what a fox is, and Flossie outwitting the fox in the end. Musical narration is also present in *The People Could Fly* (Hamilton, 2005). The introduction narrated by Barnes used music to open and close this portion of the book (Hamilton, 2005, 00:05) (Hamilton, 2005, 8:31). The opening introduced the reader to the historical knowledge that went into creating and selecting the stories in *The People Could Fly* (Hamilton, 1986). The historical care which Hamilton took to portray the stories in *The People* accurately

Could Fly (Hamilton, 1986) is emphasized by the music. The music in *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 2005) is southern and complements the narrator's storytelling style and, in Barnes's case, his voice. Barnes has a deep baritone voice honed by his operatic training that conveys the depth of African-American folk stories such as those in *The People Could Fly* (Hamilton, 1986). Each story in the book, while entertaining, is considered the birthright and heritage of the Black diaspora. The use of music in *Jazz* (Myers, 2019) is paramount to the telling of the story. If music were not present, one would argue that the audiobook adaptation of *Jazz* (Myers, 2019) should not have been created. The music of Jazz is talkative and expressive. Instruments are personified and are in constant dialogue with each other in *Jazz*. The music and narrators work together to bring the best out of each other. Williams and Thomas's backgrounds as Jazz and R&B singer-songwriters allow them to tackle the AAVE in *Jazz* (Myers, 2019). In *The People Could Fly* (Hamilton, 2005), *Jazz* (Myers, 2019), and *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 2005), music plays a unique role in Black Authenticity and Authorship because it supports the importance of history and culture in narration. To say that music plays a significant role in Black culture is an understatement. Music, from slavery days to the present, all tell a story of a people who went from being enslaved chattel to reaching successes that no one of that time could have ever dreamt possible. Publishers have to consider the vocal narration as well as the musical narration to move from basic storytelling to an audiobook experience.

### **Positionality of Narrators**

As we move towards a cultural standard in audiobook narrator selection, it is notable to acknowledge the positionality of each narrator according to the text they narrate. The positionality of the narrator played a substantial role in influencing each performance. Author is a background that two-fifths of the narrators held and reflected two of the better narrations. McKissack and Lester both narrated their books and thus had a better idea of how to give an

authentic portrayal. They had information that the average hired narrator's performance would not have and that knowledge enhanced the audio narration. McKissack is a prolific children's author, and her extensive knowledge of African-American history and her success as an author of Black children's literature allowed her to use her expertise to influence her narration style along with her southern upbringing. In *The tales of Uncle Remus: The Adventures of Brer Rabbit* (Lester, 1987), Lester's positionality as a folklorist, academic, and children's literature author colored his retelling of the Brer Rabbit stories and the subsequent narration performance he provided.

Author narration is by no means the rule by which all excellent narrations are built. *Jazz* (Myers, 2008) was not narrated by the author Walter Dean Myers but was instead narrated by James D-Train Williams and Vaneese Thomas. Williams' and Thomas's backgrounds as Jazz and R&B singer-songwriters allowed them to transition easily into narrating the AAVE in Jazz. Musically, they can weave the elements of Jazz into their narration and, along with the added music, created an audiobook experience that transcends typical audiobook narration. Along with Williams and Thomas, Lester also has musical roots, which assist in his storytelling style. Julius Lester taught guitar, performed as a folk singer in New York City when he decided to go to Mississippi during Freedom Summer (PBS, 2014). Lester cites that his father played a significant influence on his music, as his father was a preacher and used music and language to reach his congregation (PBS, 2014). This blend of musical background and narration is an exciting mix relating to counter-storytelling. Being able to tell your own story and the story of your people who are in a marginalized state using your culture's music is compelling and is something that cannot be readily duplicated and co-opted by anybody else.

### **Implications**

The analysis of a small sample of audiobooks produced findings that call into question the practices of publishers and directly answer how African-American Vernacular English is narrated in Black children's literature audiobook performances, and how narrator selection practices complicate authenticity and authorship within Black children's literature. First of all, there are only a small number of audiobooks that fit the given criteria. Given the demand for audiobooks in general, more audiobooks that meet the suggested criteria for excellence should be made available. Second, the analysis has revealed a need for a careful selection of narrators for audiobooks in the Black children's literature genre. It is not enough to just choose a narrator that "looks the part." The narrator must have cultural nuance as well as racial background on their side to be considered a well-rounded narrator of Black children's literature. Culture and musical acuity have also been identified as two significant features of narrators for audiobook versions of Black children's literature. If these factors become commonplace in the choice of narrators for Black children's literature audiobooks, they could ultimately contribute to the deconstruction of colonizing practices in publishing. This change in practice also has the potential along the way to improve the genre of audiobooks across all topics, age groups, etc. The suggestions produced by limitations will also be explored.

### **Audiobook Availability and Narrator Selection**

In making available more audiobooks that fit the study's given criteria, we first must begin with the deconstruction of the supply and demand for audiobooks in general to support the claim that cultural criteria for narrator selection excellence should be made available.

Audiobooks within a classroom setting are great places to source the demand for audiobooks in favor of culturally authentic narrative performances. Specific forms of literature are particularly well served through auditory channels (Baskin & Harris, 1995). Stories where characters speak

with accents or specialized dialect is best facilitated by an auditory presentation. In *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 2005), McKissack, both a children's literature author and southerner, tells the story of Flossie and her run-in with a trickster fox, accurately replicating the speech patterns of southern AAVE and powerfully evoking listeners' interior images of the settings, individuals, and circumstances of the narrative. Dialects, often problematic for less than proficient readers to decode, are rendered intelligible in audiobook format, narrated by trained narrators whose backgrounds fit with the culture of the book (Baskin & Harris, 1995).

Further support of culturally relevant audiobooks that fit the suggested qualitative criteria of the study is again reinforced by the Odyssey Award book selection criteria. Librarians, teachers, and parents use professional reviews and awards to guide purchases and selection of books for children and young adults. Professional associations, such as the American Library Association (ALA) and the International Literacy Association (IRA), (formerly International Reading Association), and state-level affiliates, have created book awards to distinguish the best of the best (Cahill & Richey, 2015). Odyssey Award Committee members evaluate the following quality criteria for narration: The narrator should be expressive, dynamic, use dialects correctly and consistently, differentiate between characters, speak clearly, pace words appropriately, and engage the listener (Cahill & Richey, 2015). Music also informs the selection process of an award-winning audiobook. The Odyssey Awards suggest that background music and sound effects, when used, should enhance the listening experience and fit the mood of the text. This criteria culturally and production-wise supports the claim that music enhances narrator quality and is in itself a narrator as well. *Jazz* (Myers, 2019) used music to enhance the quality of narration and moves succinctly along with the various moods of the story vignettes in *Jazz*



(Myers, 2008), creating a personified musical narrator. *Jazz* (Myers, 2008), to further support this claim, *Jazz* was the first recipient of an Odyssey Award.

Based on the evidence of cultural demand by professional reviews and awards, and classrooms, it would be lucrative for publishers to be mindful of narration choices for Black children's literature and make Black children's literature readily available for audiobook rendering. Applying this logic, more books like *Flossie and the Fox* (McKissack, 1986) will realize a popular resurgence in narration performances if they were narrated in ways that adhere to Black Authenticity, generating product convergence by way of capitalization of demand for Black children's audiobooks narrated by nuanced Black narrators.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of the study created questions that the initial research was unable to answer. This study, intended to pilot the selection and analysis techniques of the research with the intentions of being applied to larger future samples, is not conclusive and leaves out various factors that could continue to inform how African-American Vernacular English is narrated in Black children's literature audiobook performances, and how narrator selection practices complicate authenticity and authorship within Black children's literature. Initially, the sampling size of thirty-two books was deemed sufficient enough to test the study. Given the time frame in which this study was created, how vast the subject matter has the potential to be, and how little research exists on the topic, the sampling size can and should be more substantial. A study such as this would also benefit from having multiple listeners with nuanced positionalities and identities. The researcher was the sole listener for all audiobooks chosen, and in the future, it would be beneficial to include children, teachers, parents, and other scholars as audiobook listeners in this study. Additional questions also arose from the research that has the potential to be conducted as singular studies and make great topics for scholarly articles that currently do not

exist. These questions involved the narrative role that music plays in audiobooks, the use of audiobooks in a classroom setting (especially in English classes), and the process of creating audiobooks and what informs the selections of narrators. Recommendations that would follow this study would be for consumers of audiobooks to research narrators of Black children's books and choose books that feature narrators who are indigenous to where the text is situated. Another recommendation would be for scholars and researchers to create a scholarship that combines audiobooks, children's literature, and AAVE, as there is currently no such scholarship that includes them in triplicate. The researcher acknowledges these limitations and addresses them by conducting thorough research of the existing supporting literature while making connections from other disciplines that inform the research topic, as the researcher intends to further study the narration of AAVE in audiobooks within the Black children's literature genre.

The availability of audiobooks that fit the suggested criteria, attention to narrator selection, and tools such as awards and notable book lists provide parents, teachers, and everyday people with culturally competent audiobook suggestions. Black children's audiobook literature that adheres to these points would allow counter-storytelling and the reclaiming of stories by Black people. In creating this research that centers around AAVE narration and narrator selection, more literature can be created and discovered that allows Black students to hear themselves diversely woven in literature and could inspire other children's literature genres to explore this avenue of narrative recognition. This is why the need for vocal counter-storytelling in Black children's audiobook literature is so urgent.

### **Conclusion**

Reviewing children's literature that features AAVE highlights the importance of doing the research that dismantles systematic racism in literature and publishing practices. The challenges and obstacles that whiteness (Africanist Theory) and lack of Black authentic narrator-

ship (Counter-storytelling) create establish a blockade to the path of presenting to Black children AAVE in a manner that is relevant and transformative to themselves and others. Black authors and narrators innately can relate to the stories about Black children (as they were once Black children themselves echoing Jacqueline Woodson) and, in turn, are more likely to stock their books with AAVE that will better allow narrators to engage with AAVE in responsible and authentic ways. The findings of this study support the importance of this and support the critique of white-facing publishing house's role in blocking the culturally relevant AAVE to be performed by Black narrators who are suited for the culture of the book. Authenticity in Black narration section practices in Black children's literature is critical in providing Black children a way in which to hear themselves and their culture.

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